

## FREE TRADE AND PRINT CULTURE: POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

**Abstract:** This article highlights the potency of traditional popular print culture as a form of political communication for one of the pioneering campaigns of the nineteenth-century: the free trade agitation of the 1840s. Contributing to recent debates about Victorian political communication, it challenges the view that the spread of literacy and print replaced a more traditional, inclusive, hybrid style of communication. The use and adaptation of broadside culture that blurred literacy, orality and visuality proved to be a more effective means of communicating free trade to popular audiences than ‘modern’ methods of political communication such as official newspapers or mass propaganda. Joseph Livesey, the most successful free trade popularizer, was able to bridge the gap between free trade and Chartism, by drawing on elements of radical print culture, while seeking to shift them onto a more respectable trajectory. Livesey and cheap free trade print culture anticipated the shift from popular radicalism to popular liberalism in political culture and popular politics that occurred after 1850.

**Keywords:** political communication; free trade; print culture; popular politics; Chartism.

Political scientists and historians have long emphasized the pioneering role of the Anti-Corn Law League (1838-46) the main free trade pressure group, in developing modern forms of mass political organization, communication and electioneering.<sup>1</sup> The repeal of the corn laws in 1846 laid the basis for the long hegemony of free trade in

Britain.<sup>2</sup> Recent work has argued that the League helped to develop a new consumer culture and through its leader, Richard Cobden, a wider culture of political celebrity.<sup>3</sup> The transnational influence of free trade is another aspect of modern political economy that originated with the League.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some geographers have argued that the modern ideology of globalization can be traced back to the League.<sup>5</sup> Historians have become sceptical of grand narratives of political modernization revolving around the development of party politics and electoral reform,<sup>6</sup> but it is striking how often the League is still seen as a harbinger of ‘modern’ political culture or political economy.

The focus on what was new or modern in nineteenth-century political campaigns and social movements has obscured the importance of more traditional features. Craig Calhoun has argued that early nineteenth-century radicalism had an intense appeal precisely because it was embedded in traditional and communitarian contexts that spoke to common experiences.<sup>7</sup> As Calhoun reminds us, while often regarded as progressive agents of change, class politics or political modernization, nineteenth-century social movements looked back as well as forwards.

Much of the classic and recent work on free trade has emphasized the innovative, pioneering nature of the League’s campaign and the global, transnational dimension of free trade as a cosmopolitan, universal ideology. Focusing on cheap printed ephemera, especially *The Struggle* (1842-6) edited by Joseph Livesey, this article highlights the continuing importance of traditional, quotidian forms of political communication. Traditional forms of print could often be more effective in addressing popular audiences than ‘modern’ forms such as newspapers or mass distributed propaganda of the type developed by anti-slavery.<sup>8</sup> This article offers a fresh perspective on the long running debate on nineteenth-century political communication stimulated by James Vernon’s claim that print was used to ‘reconstitute the public

sphere in an ever-more restrictive fashion', excluding the illiterate and those who had been included by a blend of oral, visual and print culture.<sup>9</sup> Most of this debate has focused on election culture, with James Thompson and Matthew Roberts recently highlighting the role of visual posters and election cartoons in the late nineteenth century to challenge Vernon's argument.<sup>10</sup> Such material shows that political communication remained highly visual, and furthermore, such material was publicly displayed, especially during election campaigns, rather than consumed passively in private.<sup>11</sup> However, this debate has generally ignored the innovative communication strategies deployed by the mighty political campaigns that existed outside of elections and political parties.

Secondly, the article offers a reappraisal of the relationship between free trade and Chartism, the working-class movement for democratic reform. The huge historiography on Chartism has usually regarded the relations between Chartists and the League as mutually antagonistic.<sup>12</sup> As many Chartists argued that the corn laws were a symptom of an iniquitous political system, while supporting radical reform and repeal, they argued that the former must be the priority.<sup>13</sup> Peter Gurney has argued that Chartists differentiated themselves from the League in their emphasis on legislation and community action to protect working-class consumers, and their deep-rooted commitment to democracy.<sup>14</sup> Chartists sought democratic reforms to regulate the free market, while the League argued that the extension of the franchise (but not democracy) would follow naturally as more working men rented or owned property of the requisite value to secure the vote. For the League, the vote was a commodity and a 'reward for good behaviour' within the capitalist system.<sup>15</sup>

The conventional view of Chartist-League relations has been unaffected by the revisionist critiques of Gareth Stedman Jones and Patrick Joyce, who downgraded the

importance of social class in nineteenth-century politics, instead stressing the appeal of an inclusive political language that spoke to all excluded from political rights.<sup>16</sup> In examining the contest between alternative visions of consumption represented by the League and the Chartists, Gurney's most recent contribution overlooks independent free traders such as Livesey, who drew on traditions of radical print culture and, unlike the League, opposed the new poor law.

There was a broader popular audience and constituency for free trade outside the League. As Charles Tilly has noted, 'a single organization rarely sustains or contains a whole social movement' and this was true of the free trade campaign.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the League, there are few reasons to doubt the widespread popularity of the repeal of the corn laws, which was celebrated in numerous ballads.<sup>18</sup> There was a broad popular constituency for the repeal, appealing to workers as well as middle-class activists, as shown by free trade petitions or popular street theatre.<sup>19</sup> Livesey himself cited petitions as 'indisputable proof that the working men, after all, hate the corn laws'.<sup>20</sup> This broad support for repeal is less surprising when placed in the wider context of popular politics in the long nineteenth century. Examples such as anti-slavery or the late Victorian Conservative party suggest that an ability to mobilize broad-based coalitions of popular support was key to the success of political movements or parties.<sup>21</sup> This context also explains the use of different forms of political communication to appeal to different audiences as part of wider coalitions of support. Ephemeral forms of free trade literature played a hitherto unrecognized role in building a broad, popular constituency for free trade. As such, free trade print culture and its impact needs to be taken account of in the longstanding debate about why the corn laws were repealed. Historical interpretations of repeal have long focused on the role of the League, Sir Robert Peel, as well as shifts in ideology, the

state and high politics.<sup>22</sup> Considering cheap free trade print culture offers further evidence that repeal was genuinely popular and appealed to wide and diverse audiences.

Regardless of the polarized relations between Chartism and the League, broadside ballads yoked together free trade with other popular demands including justice for Ireland and repeal of the hated new poor law, as in this example published in 1846.

We've won England Free Trade, and in peace let us keep her,  
And make all the grubbery very much cheaper,  
And we'll find work for all that are out of employ,  
Oh, wont we Jack? – I believe you my boy!

We'll make bread as cheap, as the meat soon must be,  
They shall get quite crummy instead of crusty,  
And we'll soon put a stop to the Irish debaters,  
For they wont care a fig about rotten potatoes.  
We'll stop agitation as fast as we can,  
By doing full justice between man and man,  
Till the Irish shall join us in happy communion,  
Then we'll have a repeal of the New Poor Law Union.

We've won England Free Trade, &c.<sup>23</sup>

Another ballad from the 1840s, featuring John Bull, stated 'An alteration must take place, together they did sing,/ In the Corn Laws and the Poor Laws and many another thing'.<sup>24</sup> These examples suggest that the divisions separating issues in the popular mind were less rigid than the usual study of rival campaigns indicates. This article

explores how free traders sought to win over working-class support and restores a missing component to one of the most important campaigns in pre-democratic popular politics.

After providing a general overview of the uses of print in the League's campaign, the article examines the difficulties that the League faced in reaching popular, working-class audiences. Finally, the article analyses the innovative use of traditional formats in Livesey's anti-corn law periodical *The Struggle*. With his genuinely popular sympathies and accessible prose, Livesey had much in common with radical writers such as William Cobbett. The use of staples of street literature suggests that Livesey's *Struggle* was close in tone, style and form to popular radicalism and popular culture. While the reception of particular ephemeral texts remains difficult to recover, early modern scholars have argued that, at a general level, popular print culture created new publics.<sup>25</sup> As well as helping to create a new popular audience for Cobdenite free trade, evidence of circulation and distribution and contemporary comment suggests that the *Struggle* had a unique reach compared to other free trade periodicals.

#### FREE TRADE PRINT CULTURE

The League was one of the most ruthless and successful political machines in modern British history. Founded in Manchester in 1838 and dominated by Lancashire textile manufacturers, in its early years it focused on 'educating' public opinion through itinerant lecturing and print, and mobilizing it through petitions to Parliament. After 1843 the League switched to a policy of electoral pressure: registering supporters as electors to pressure MPs and return free traders to the House of Commons.<sup>26</sup> The new strategy was expensive and required unprecedented fundraising drives to raise

£50,000, £100,000 and £250,000 in successive years. Print was central to the free trade campaign. Firstly, the League relied on an official newspaper to build identity, educate and organize public opinion, and, less successfully, to attract new supporters. Secondly, the League perfected the use of the mass distribution of print for political purposes, although after 1843 material was increasingly directed at electors. These limitations explain the importance of a third strand: cheap, unofficial printed ephemera to reach the urban working class and agricultural labourers.

The growth of newspapers was a major feature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Taken by contemporaries as a sign of intellectual progress, the press has loomed large in accounts of nineteenth-century popular politics and culture.<sup>27</sup> For many campaigns, an official newspaper was essential for internal communication and organization, building a common identity, and countering the misrepresentations of the London press.<sup>28</sup> Yet expectations of reaching a wider audience beyond activists were rarely met.

The League's newspaper - successively titled the *Anti-Corn Law Circular* (1839-41), the *Anti-Bread Tax Circular* (1841-3) and *The League* (1843-6) - was conceived by Cobden as 'a vehicle for conveying sound principles of commerce'.<sup>29</sup> The aim was to 'furnish facts for the newspaper press' enabling sympathetic journalists to cut and paste material from the newspaper, spreading them through the wider media, and the *Circular* was also sent to the elite political clubs of Westminster.<sup>30</sup> The newspaper's circulation quickly tailed off and by April 1842, John Bright complained that 'the influence of the *Circular* [was] very limited' and proposed purchasing the *Manchester Times* and converting that into the League's journal.<sup>31</sup> In the same month the League's printer wrote that the circulation had fallen to 2,400, of which 700 copies were given away gratuitously.<sup>32</sup> After 1843, the

newspaper's weekly circulation hovered between 15,000 and 20,000 until it was discontinued on the repeal of the corn laws in July 1846.<sup>33</sup> This figure typically consisted of 15,000 copies given free to subscribers and only 5,000 sales, which was why the newspaper haemorrhaged money.<sup>34</sup> Accounts reveal that between September 1843 and December 1844 the newspaper's costs exceeded receipts from sales by over £18,000, while in 1845 the paper made a further loss of over £10,000.<sup>35</sup> While the newspaper may well have influenced policy-makers and the press, its readership largely consisted of card-carrying Leaguers rather than a broader public. The example of the League's newspaper suggests that the role of the press as an agent of nineteenth-century popular politics can be overstated, and it is notable that much recent work has focused on public speech, oratory and meetings.<sup>36</sup> Another instance of the problems faced by official newspapers would be the high attrition rate of Chartist periodicals, with even the mighty *Northern Star* declining to a fairly small circulation after its peak in the late 1830s.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, building on the dissemination of unsolicited 'free print' by religious tract societies and anti-slavery, the League perfected the mass distribution of propaganda. The League propagandist Alexander Somerville caught the mood of technological optimism when he wrote that 'by railways, penny postage and printing presses, a mighty movement is in progress, which will achieve, *be it for good or evil*, what no other power or combination of powers ever achieved'.<sup>38</sup> Improvements in communications and technology allowed print to be produced and circulated in ever larger quantities, while the annual compilation of electoral registers stipulated in the 1832 Reform Act made possible the systematic targeting of literature at electors. In 1843 the League distributed over 5 million anti-corn law tracts to electors, with another 426,000 stitched into periodicals and newspapers. In the same year the



League disseminated 3.6 million anti-corn law papers and tracts ‘among the working classes and others, who are non-electors’.<sup>39</sup> Yet after 1843 the League’s propaganda machine was increasingly directed at electors, and much of the content was from hired pens such as Somerville and W.J. Fox. Free traders like Livesey had greater licence to carve out an independent position with greater credibility with popular audiences.

Whatever the impact and influence of the League’s mass propaganda on recipients, it seems likely that protectionists were outgunned in terms of scale. Yet the increasing focus on registration and electors marginalized the poor and unenfranchised, who had been able to contribute to the free trade campaign through petitioning.<sup>40</sup> Focusing on electors introduced ‘a more divisive use of formal communication’, excluding a portion of the community who had previously been served by inclusive forms of print that blurred literacy and orality.<sup>41</sup>

While official newspapers and mass propaganda can be understood as modern forms of political communication emerging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the example of the League shows that both forms had their limits in terms of penetrating sections of the population who were not already engaged in the free trade campaign. Henry Ashworth, one of the architects of the League’s agitation, later reflected that ‘the working class as a body ... for the most part held aloof from the League’.<sup>42</sup> However, the use of populist, demotic forms of print to appeal to broader constituencies was problematic for a campaign led by manufacturers eager to avoid the blame for popular disturbances.

#### THE LEAGUE AND POPULAR ECONOMIC DEBATE

In the late 1830s and early 1840s, in many urban areas, Chartists and protectionist Conservatives formed temporary, tacit alliances around a shared antipathy to the

Whig government, the League and the new poor law. The highpoint of the Chartist-Tory alliance was the 1841 general election, and was most pronounced in urban, industrial areas such as the Staffordshire Potteries or Black Country, where class tensions between employers and workers were at their sharpest.<sup>43</sup> Conservative candidates argued that manufacturers sought free trade so they could reduce wages in line with the price of food. The League rejected the link between high prices and high wages and argued that workers would benefit as consumers from falling prices and the employment and increased wages that would result from overseas trade.<sup>44</sup>

The populist element of the protectionist campaign has been overlooked in the usual focus on landowners and farmers.<sup>45</sup> Tory-Chartist collaborations show that protectionists could mobilize popular support in urban areas. Protectionists and their Chartist allies used opposition to the new poor law as an alternative popular ‘cry’ to repeal. For example, in 1841, Conservatives employed a barrister named Charles Wilkins as an anti-poor law lecturer at the Walsall by-election in February and at Newcastle-under-Lyme at the general election in June. At Walsall, Wilkins engaged James Acland, the notorious League lecturer, in debate.<sup>46</sup> Privately, the Liberal election agent Joseph Parkes dismissed Wilkins as

only a frothing peregrinating barrister, who bolted from Cambridge with an actor’s wife: a vulgar spouter at the North[ern] Conservative Societies with Acland’s lungs. Acland, if he can get at him, will spike his gun in a minute. A *Duck pond* is his proper punishment. He has no talent, nothing but leather lungs & will do you no harm.<sup>47</sup>

However, Wilkins contributed to the return of Conservatives in both constituencies. Alluding to the financial aid given to Acland’s lecture tour in the late 1830s by

leading Leaguers, Wilkins sarcastically asked ‘was it not a most extraordinary thing that these advocates for the poor man, had actually paid Mr. Acland and others to preach in favour of the New Poor Law?’<sup>48</sup> The thrust of Wilkins’s attack was shrewd. Although a small borough, due to the survival of the freeman franchise after 1832, Newcastle-under-Lyme had a large proportion of working-class electors.<sup>49</sup> The anti-poor law cry appealed to non-electors but, crucially, also to those artisans who were voters.

The new poor law was a weak spot for the League. While critical of the cruelty of the new poor law, free traders stopped short of demanding its abolition and tried to neutralize the issue. Free trade scribes argued that the new poor law and the corn laws were incompatible.<sup>50</sup> The former prevented the able-bodied working man from claiming relief, yet the latter restricted trade, thereby reducing employment and wages, and keeping the price of provisions high. Pauperism was a symptom, but the corn laws were the ‘disease’ afflicting the body politic.<sup>51</sup> By establishing general prosperity free trade would make the new poor law a dead letter.<sup>52</sup>

A second difficulty the League faced was that populist print could risk its reputations with its middle-class supporters, the wider public and politicians. Print was arguably most politically potent when it blurred the boundaries of literacy and orality and appealed to the senses and emotions. Conservatives feared print as an agent of revolution and subversion, believing that print could spread seditious doctrines like miasma among the poorest, and most numerous class.<sup>53</sup> This was why Conservatives had long supported the ‘taxes on knowledge’ (newspaper stamp duty, advertisement and paper duty) to price radical newspapers out of the reach of the working classes. The League’s use of cheap printed ephemera to appeal to a mass audience was greeted with alarm by its opponents.

In 1841 and 1842 the League adopted increasingly emotive, visceral appeals to the senses to rouse popular passions against the newly elected Conservative government. Like the Chartists, free traders used melodramatic, cannibalistic tropes to politicize the issue of hunger.<sup>54</sup> Free trade handbills used strong language and bold typographics to appeal to working men (Figure 1). The League promoted the public display of little and large loaves to represent the difference between protection and free trade. Displaying the big loaf and little loaf would keep the ‘effects of the infamous bread tax constantly before the eyes of the people’.<sup>55</sup> The *Circular* noted that ‘one pair of loaves is worth five thousand handbills, or half a dozen lecturers’ in large manufacturing towns.<sup>56</sup> While the iconography of the big and little loaf dated back to popular opposition to the 1815 Corn Law, as Anthony Howe has shown, the League’s campaign successfully mobilized the symbol as an icon of the broader concept of free trade.<sup>57</sup>

Protectionists regarded the distribution of cheap print during a depression as incendiary. In his survey of free trade literature, the Tory writer J.W. Croker argued that while Chartists may have borne the brunt of the judicial repercussions for the disturbances in the summer of 1842, the League’s propaganda was responsible for encouraging desperate people to turn against their social superiors.<sup>58</sup> In Parliament, Lord Mahon told fellow MPs that he had seen cheap free trade print culture that ‘strongly tended to exasperate the feelings of the people - to raise master against man, town against land, and the lower classes against the higher’, dissolving the organic, social bonds that held together the body politic.<sup>59</sup> Mahon argued that emotive images, depicting starving people being denied bread by soldiers, would stir up the manufacturing districts as they were easily understood by all. Conservative newspapers agreed that: ‘There is nothing which appeals more powerfully to the

populace than *a picture*, and in one of those scattered in thousands ... [it] presents them with a spectacle well calculated to drive them to desperation.'<sup>60</sup>

However, cheap print could risk alienating supporters and gaining the League an unwanted reputation for disorder. Cobden was always conscious of the need to keep League propaganda within respectable limits. When considering illustrations for the League's newspaper in 1839, he argued that as 'Our *Circular* is not read chiefly by the lower classes - but by the earnest & right-minded politicians of the Sturge school - We must therefore avoid grossness & mere caricature.'<sup>61</sup> Respectable portraits rather than caricatures became the League's preferred form of visual communication.<sup>62</sup> After 1842, Livesey's *Struggle* was exceptional in providing demotic free trade imagery to a cheap, popular market as this ground had been abandoned by the League. Cobden was equally alarmed when Acland published an inflammatory placard likely to alienate the League's religious supporters and 'to identify us with any ... revolution that may break out'.<sup>63</sup> For these reasons, after 1842 the League drew back from using cheap print to its full potential, although Livesey, an independent campaigner operating on his own account, showed how the medium could be effectively used to popularize free trade.

#### *THE STRUGGLE OF JOSEPH LIVESEY*

There were a number of short-lived cheap free trade periodicals, such as the *Free Trader*, the *Bread Basket* and the *Bread Eater's Advocate* in the early 1840s.<sup>64</sup> The exception was *The Struggle*, which published 235 numbers from the start of 1842 until repeal in July 1846, but which has generally been neglected in histories of early Victorian popular politics aside from brief, perceptive comments by Norman Longmate, Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell.<sup>65</sup> Livesey's *Struggle* is significant as it shows the continued potency of traditional forms of print culture to reach popular

audiences. Furthermore, specific distribution and circulation practices were used to encourage public consumption and face-to-face communication. Contrary to Vernon's argument that the rise of print led to passive, privatized reading, here is an example of print culture being used to promote public participation and interaction.

Livesey had a background that set him apart from the numerous middle-class Evangelical and Utilitarian writers who used cheap print to communicate political economy to the working classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Famous examples of this genre include Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795-8) or Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-4).<sup>66</sup> By contrast, Livesey's *déclassé* origins meant he had a more organic relationship with the working classes. Livesey had grown up in comparative poverty after the collapse of the family textile firm, before making his fortune as a cheese factor. He later reflected that 'I have still all the feelings of a poor man; I prefer the company of poor people ... I have tried two or three times to be a gentleman; that is, to leave off work and to enjoy myself, but it never answered'.<sup>67</sup> Livesey shared the autodidactic background common to many radical writers and politicians.<sup>68</sup>

Livesey was already a formidable political communicator by the time of the *Struggle*. As the 'father of teetotalism' (it was under Livesey's aegis that seven men took the first teetotal pledge in Preston in 1833) Livesey toured the country to spread the temperance message, especially through his famous *Malt Liquor Lecture*.<sup>69</sup> Over 100,000 copies of the printed lecture were circulated.<sup>70</sup> He published the *Moral Reformer* (1832-4) and the *Preston Temperance Advocate* (1834-7), which made use of front-page woodcuts to attract lower class readers. In his dispatch on cheap literature, William Makepeace Thackeray praised the *Moral Reformer* as 'not merely good in its intention, but very well executed'.<sup>71</sup>

Livesey's *Struggle* innovatively worked within and blended two traditions. Firstly, he drew on a tradition of cheap free trade print culture that pre-dated the formation of the League. The Chartist Robert Lowery later recalled that C.P. Thompson's *Anti-Corn Law Catechism* (first published in 1827) and similar works 'were widely circulated and at that time well understood and advocated by the working classes'.<sup>72</sup> Before the foundation of the League, cheap free trade print culture came in myriad forms, including ballads and election ephemera. Ballads such as 'Hunting a Loaf', apparently from the 1810s, are evidence of the political salience of the corn laws during an earlier period of popular radicalism.<sup>73</sup> Candidates at parliamentary elections used slogans to appeal to non-electors. For example, an election handbill from the 1826 Bridgnorth election stated 'W.W. Whitmore For Ever./ A FREE TRADE,/A LARGE LOAF,/ AND NO CORN LAWS'.<sup>74</sup> The practice of printing texts of petitions and circulating them as broadsides was another way in which anti-corn law ideas were circulated through ephemeral print. An example of an anti-corn law petition broadside from the inhabitants of Bolton from the late 1820s, survives in the papers collected by the radical organizer Francis Place.<sup>75</sup>

Secondly, Livesey made skillful use of the tradition of broadsides and printed ephemera. The tradition of broadside culture persisted deep into the nineteenth-century. The market for broadsides was arguably undermined by the emergence of cheap newspapers and song books after 1850, but Rohan McWilliam has noted the huge proliferation of ballads as part of the popular culture associated with the Tichborne Claimant campaign of the 1870s.<sup>76</sup> Broadsides were 'cheap, popular and easy to distribute'.<sup>77</sup> By the 1830s broadsides were increasingly embedded within urban contexts as part of the broader phenomenon of street literature.<sup>78</sup> If no longer

part of a purely oral culture, broadsides remained ‘something communal, something to be performed and shared’, particularly in public space.<sup>79</sup>

Although generally overlooked by historians, broadsides and ephemera could be a potent form of political communication.<sup>80</sup> For example, McWilliam has noted that the broadsides associated with the Tichborne Claimant campaign of the 1870s represented a ‘counter-culture’ and “‘public opinion’ of the street’.<sup>81</sup> Martha Vicinus has examined the use of broadsides by north-east coal miners in the labour disputes of the 1830s and 1840s. The broadsides, which were strongly marked by Methodism and radicalism, reflected the class and sense of place of the miners but also appealed to the wider community.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, it is notable that Tory-Radicals employed ephemeral forms of print as well as official newspapers such as Reverend G.S. Bull’s *British Labourer’s Protector, and Factory Child’s Friend* (1832-3) or Richard Oastler’s *Fleet Papers* (1841-4). In their campaigns for a ten hour day for factory workers and against the new poor law, Bull and Oastler regularly published short one or two page addresses, often based on speeches. These addresses sought to intimately address their audience, followed the cadences of oral speech and read like rousing sermons, reflecting the religious motivations and rhetoric associated with Bull and Oastler’s style of campaigning.<sup>83</sup>

The content of the *Struggle* drew heavily on the broadside tradition, blurring the distinctions between visual, oral and literate culture to create an inclusive form of print culture. Equally importantly, the circulation and distribution strategies Livesey used were designed to promote face-to-face engagement. The periodical was ‘circulated gratuitously’, or sold for one halfpenny.<sup>84</sup> Issues were undated so that old copies could be continuously circulated.<sup>85</sup> Livesey enterprisingly repackaged material from the *Struggle* into anti-corn law almanacks, utilizing another long-standing



format of popular print culture.<sup>86</sup> Malcolm Chase has noted that almanacks were ‘an essential household item’.<sup>87</sup> Livesey’s 1843 and 1845 almanacks were sold for a penny. This was the same price as Chartist almanacks but much lower than the 4d. 1841 and 1842 official League almanacks.<sup>88</sup> Revealingly, the League recognized Livesey’s superiority in catering for a popular market and withdrew their plans for publishing an almanack for 1843 and do not seem to have produced any thereafter.<sup>89</sup> The woodcuts were reworked as a broadsheet anti-corn law picture gallery and at least 130,000 copies were sold, and the images could also be purchased individually at a ‘low price’.<sup>90</sup> The periodical was available from booksellers and newsagents across Lancashire and Yorkshire, as well as Glasgow, London and the Midlands.<sup>91</sup> Assorted issues were available in bulk for local anti-corn law societies at a hundred copies for two shillings and six pence.<sup>92</sup> Anti-corn law associations in Liverpool and Kendal disseminated the *Struggle* in public houses, shops and temperance hotels.<sup>93</sup>

If the League’s campaign perfected the use of modern distribution methods, Livesey relied on more traditional means. He later became critical of the over-reliance of the temperance movement on the mass distribution of propaganda. Livesey’s preferred form of communication was ‘going about’: mingling and speaking with people in public space.<sup>94</sup> Rather than just transmit information, Livesey wanted to engage people through face-to-face communication. The incorporation of ballads and songs in the *Struggle* indicate that Livesey wanted the text to be read, sung and performed in public and not simply read passively in private.

The content and price of the *Struggle* was intended to encourage its sale by hawkers. According to the 1841 census, Lancashire, closely followed by Yorkshire, had more hawkers and peddlers than any other county.<sup>95</sup> Hawkers were important, but often neglected, bearers of popular culture, frequently staying with recipients and

relaying news and stories in oral form.<sup>96</sup> As with the teetotal movement, Livesey sought to recruit working men to spread the message.<sup>97</sup> Livesey's friend Joseph Christy distributed the *Struggle* in agricultural areas.<sup>98</sup> Surviving letters reveal that between May and December 1843 Christy distributed 24,900 anti-corn law papers, tracts and publications all over southern England.<sup>99</sup> The figures included disseminating 150 of Livesey's pictorial almanacks in Windsor and another 234 almanacks in Oxford, which 'were much prized'.<sup>100</sup> Livesey's use of hawkers further demonstrates that he wanted to embed the *Struggle* in face-to-face exchange and oral culture. While figures are hard to come by, the circulation of the *Struggle* seems to have been 10,000 to 15,000 copies a week, which translates to 2.3 to 3.5 million copies of the *Struggle* being produced and circulated in its four and a half year existence.<sup>101</sup> However, the periodical was probably read or heard by even more people than this as it was designed to be continuously circulated, and was distributed in public places and institutions associated with communal reading.

The format consisted of four quarto pages with a woodcut on every front page to attract a popular audience. Livesey later reflected that the images were especially effective in appealing to rural readers.<sup>102</sup> The benefits of repeal were attractively visualized. Free trade would bring a 'Golden Harvest'.<sup>103</sup> Free trade was idealized, like Britannia, in classical female form, bestowing the gifts of wealth, plenty, knowledge, peace, education and science on the nation, while booming overseas trade was represented by a busy port (Figure 2). The popular imagery in the *Struggle* owed little to the caricature tradition, which even after its transformation into cheaper wood engraved serial forms remained rooted in London.<sup>104</sup> There was an affinity between the woodcuts used by Livesey, and the illustrations in the serialized novel *The Political Pilgrim's Progress* (1839), published in the Newcastle-based Chartist

newspaper, the *Northern Liberator*.<sup>105</sup> This suggests that the woodcuts in the *Struggle* were part of a provincial, northern genre of vernacular, demotic illustration that was distinct from metropolitan caricature. Furthermore, the woodcuts were distinct from other types of contemporary political imagery. Like the provincial election cartoons surveyed by Roberts, Livesey's woodcuts used everyday analogies that drew on popular culture, but were different in that they rarely focused on individual politicians.<sup>106</sup> The woodcuts were also different to the visual strategy deployed by Chartists (and also the League), which as Malcolm Chase has argued, aimed to build identity through respectable portraits of their leaders.<sup>107</sup> While not as refined as the wood engravings in the recently founded *Illustrated London News*, Livesey's pictures remained a cut above the rudimentary images that were often randomly inserted in broadsides by ballad-mongers such as James Catnach.<sup>108</sup>

Livesey aimed to appeal to the ears as well as the eye. Each issue would contain a song or ballad 'so that it may be sung and the sold in the streets'.<sup>109</sup> When soliciting ballads from readers, Livesey insisted that they 'must be lively, popular and to the point'.<sup>110</sup> Historians of popular politics have recently begun to appreciate the importance of music and song and Livesey's emphasis on ballads should be placed in this context.<sup>111</sup> Orality was also crucial to Livesey's prose style as editorials often took the form of an open letter or personal address signed by him or using the pen name 'The Struggler.' He was utilizing a common form in radical print culture, which maintained fluidity between the printed and spoken word. Personalized addresses followed the rhythms and cadences of speech and were designed to be read aloud. This was of great value in a time before universal literacy, when newspapers were often read out, and when there was a symbiotic relationship between print and platform in radical politics.<sup>112</sup> Livesey used the personal address to appeal to farmers,

agricultural labourers, and ‘working men’, and the form gave an intimacy with his target audience.

Livesey made frequent use of staples of popular print culture, such as dramatic dialogues, secular catechisms and everyday analogies, embedding Cobdenite ideas within customary forms. In a good example of the practical way that Livesey sought to convey the free trade message to a popular audience, he used retail metaphors to contrast the price and range of produce available from rival protectionist and free trade shops.<sup>113</sup> In one dialogue between the back and belly of one man, the belly says ‘[b]ack and belly cannot be both supplied out of your scanty earnings,’ highlighting the benefits to working-class consumers of lower prices.<sup>114</sup> Secular catechisms adapted a popular religious form to tersely express Livesey’s anti-aristocratic views:

What do farmers produce? Food.

What do manufacturers produce? Everything but food.

What do landlords produce? Nothing.<sup>115</sup>

Fictional dialogues were used to explain the complicated linkages between rents, prices, wages, and foreign trade. Asked why he cannot pay his rent, Farmer Dobson tells a parliamentary committee that the operative, John Hard Hands, will not buy his produce. Hard Hands explains that the wages he receives from the manufacturer, Mr. Long Chimney, are insufficient. The manufacturer responds that his ability to pay higher wages is limited as Mr. Yankee, representing the United States of America, will not buy his manufactures. Mr. Yankee explains that this is due to restrictive protection:

*Dobson* can't pay, because *Hard Hands* can't pay; and *Hard Hands* can't pay, because *Long Chimney* can't pay; and *Long Chimney* can't pay, because *I* can't pay; and *I* can't pay, because *you* won't let me pay.<sup>116</sup>

In carving out a popular audience for free trade print independent of the League, Livesey sought to bridge the gap between the anti-corn law movement and Chartism. He had greater credibility than other free trade popularizers because of his impeccable anti-new poor law credentials.<sup>117</sup> Indeed in 1838, he had routed Acland in public debate in Preston on the issue.<sup>118</sup> 'A more horrible system could not be invented', Livesey complained, 'and its cruelty is only equalled by the hypocrisy of those who pretend it is for the good of the poor!'<sup>119</sup> Livesey was also independent unlike other free trade propagandists like Fox and Somerville, who were secretly paid by the League.<sup>120</sup> This allowed Livesey to speak freely, telling readers that 'If the Government starves us, we must starve the Government', implying the withholding of taxes, a tactic occasionally contemplated by radicals.<sup>121</sup> Unlike Acland, whose indiscretions could rebound on the League, Livesey's independence gave him greater licence to make such comments without it damaging the official campaign.

Through the widely-circulated *Struggle* Livesey was one of the unsung heroes of the anti-corn law campaign. He anticipated the working-class liberalism that developed after Chartism. The content of the *Struggle* bears a close affinity to the key tenets of later Gladstonian liberalism, with its emphasis on Cobdenite free trade, manly independence, self-improvement, and respectability.<sup>122</sup> As we shall see, Livesey also expressed sympathy for limited franchise reform and hostility to aristocratic privilege. As Anthony Howe has noted, Livesey used the rhetoric of manly independence to appeal to appeal to working men, a key constituency for later Gladstonian liberalism.<sup>123</sup> For example, protection was presented as a 'cowardly and

unmanly' policy.<sup>124</sup> Livesey, then, brought together themes and packaged them in a language that prefigured the popular liberalism that emerged after Chartism. He had close ties to the provincial liberalism that was such a distinctive feature of the Victorian period. He was heavily involved in a variety of campaigns, such as temperance and free trade, which drew their strength from provincial Nonconformity, that later formed the bedrock of Gladstonian liberalism.

Livesey's provincial roots also explain the nature of his engagement with the tradition of radical print culture, which he sought to shift onto a more respectable trajectory. Within the large literature on radical and Chartist print culture, a number of scholars have emphasized the use of bawdy and ribald humour as part of a tradition of unrespectable populist radicalism, or 'radical underworld', associated with John Cleave and Henry Hetherington.<sup>125</sup> Others have shown that 'unrespectable' forms such as melodrama and sensational fiction, particularly the mass circulation serialized novels by G.M.W. Reynolds, could be an effective vehicle for radical politics.<sup>126</sup> The unrespectable radical tradition drew much of its strength from London and contributed to the survival of an independent, popular radicalism that resisted incorporation into popular liberalism.<sup>127</sup>

As a provincial teetotaler, Livesey came at radical print culture from a very different perspective and reshaped it in a way that anticipated the popular liberal press that emerged after the repeal of newspaper stamp duty in 1855.<sup>128</sup> While Livesey drew on Cobbett's tradition of rhetoric and other staples of popular radical print culture he avoided the bawdy, sexualized type of humour associated with Cleave and other radical publishers operating in the 1830s and 1840s. Furthermore, Livesey's imagery made little use of the tradition of metropolitan caricature. Livesey maintained key elements of the style of radical print culture such as irreverence, sympathy with

the common man, and simple, accessible prose, but discarded the bawdy, or less respectable, elements. Livesey adapted the radical print culture tradition in a way that could be utilized by the nascent popular, provincial liberal press of which he was one of the pioneers, founding the *Preston Guardian* in 1844.<sup>129</sup>

In appealing to working men in 1843, Livesey admitted the ‘direct hostility’ of some workers towards the anti-corn law agitation.<sup>130</sup> He was, however, honest enough to confess that ‘I am sometimes told that I am too lenient with the cotton lords’.<sup>131</sup> He spent much of the early years of the *Struggle* attempting to persuade workers they would benefit from cheaper food and increased trade and free trade would not lower wages.<sup>132</sup> He denied that machinery was responsible for the trade depression, asking rhetorically whether people could have ‘too much good cloth? ... too many shirts, sheets, coats or hats?’<sup>133</sup> Livesey’s independence, opposition to the new poor law and shared social background gave him greater credibility in addressing these concerns. Furthermore, he was sympathetic to a ten hour day for workers, but doubted whether this could be achieved by legislation. In his view, repeal of the corn laws would be a ‘short time bill’ as increased purchasing power would mean workers could work fewer hours and keep the same standard of living.<sup>134</sup>

Livesey urged Chartists to support ‘the shorter and surer agitation for free trade and cheap bread’.<sup>135</sup> A woodcut that presented free traders ‘storming the castle of monopoly’ implied that once the fortress had been breached, Chartist success would quickly follow. The woodcut implied continuity between the free trade and Chartist campaigns and earlier agitations for parliamentary reform and Catholic rights (Figure 3). While sympathetic to political reform, Livesey prioritized free trade as the solution to hunger and depressed trade. In one dialogue a repealer says to a Chartist:

‘If the country is to starve till you get universal suffrage ... all relief ... must be very distant indeed.’<sup>136</sup>

Livesey carved out discrete appeals to different classes, but also emphasized the mutual interests of the productive classes, and sought to unite all classes through fiery language. Here, Livesey drew on the tradition of ‘Old Corruption’ critiques associated with Cobbett. One wood engraving depicted scales with aristocratic luxuries going untaxed, while food for the poor was lifted out of reach of the poor man.<sup>137</sup> Aristocratic legislators were portrayed as duping and robbing poor John Bull, a trope with a long pedigree in radical discourse.<sup>138</sup> Even by the standards set by lecturers like Acland, Livesey’s language was pretty ripe. Livesey constantly compared landowners to thieves, who ‘robbed the bellies of the poor’.<sup>139</sup> At the end of one dialogue, a character says ‘if I had my way, I’d hang every bread-taxer’.<sup>140</sup>

There are then good reasons to think that Livesey had more success in appealing to working class audiences than the official League campaign. His popular sympathies, social background, and anti-new poor law credentials gave him a credible and authentic voice, while his innovative publishing and circulation strategies brought anti-corn law arguments to audiences far and wide. He skillfully drew on the tradition of popular print culture and deployed many radical themes to craft a distinctive and potent appeal that was circulated to millions. There was no correspondence column and the response of readers remains unknown and in all likelihood irretrievably so. However, leading free traders including Cobden, Bright, Villiers and the *Economist* all testified to its successful appeal to the working classes.<sup>141</sup> The lack of surviving evidence about reception of particular texts has not prevented early modern scholars from arguing for the significance of ephemeral print in creating new publics. In Livesey’s case, the evidence of circulation and distribution practices, content, and



contemporary comment suggests that he helped to create a popular constituency for free trade.

## CONCLUSIONS

The examination of cheap free trade print culture highlights the significance and effectiveness of traditional forms of popular culture as political communication. Despite the League's colossal resources they found it difficult to reach popular audiences through their official newspapers or mass produced and disseminated propaganda. Livesey was an innovative publisher and writer, however his significance lies not in developing new forms of political communication, but through his skillful adaptation and use of existing popular forms of print culture. Indeed, Livesey's talent for addressing popular and working-class audiences allowed the League to focus their attention on other groups: middle-class women, electors, and farmers and agriculturists. It is tempting to conclude that the League left the popular market to Livesey after 1842.

This article has important implications for the debate about nineteenth-century political communication, by highlighting the potency of populist, inclusive print culture in one of the major campaigns of the period. This contribution shifts the focus away from elections and party competition to the social movements and campaigns that were such a distinctive feature of Victorian politics. Vernon has argued that print, party propaganda and privatized reading increasingly excluded the illiterate from public participation in politics and effectively tamed popular politics. However, Vernon's thesis most accurately describes a distinct, liberal and relatively brief moment of optimism in the late 1860s and 1870s. In this period, cheap daily newspapers, the 1867 Reform Act and the 1870 Education Act, seemed to make possible rationalized, deliberative debate among a new mass working-class electorate,

but this should not be mistaken for a permanent closing down of a vibrant, participatory political culture. Liberal intellectuals were swiftly disillusioned and parties soon turned to emotive visual and textual propaganda to appeal to the electorate, which remained very much untamed by new party machines.<sup>142</sup>

A study of free trade print culture, secondly, complicates our understanding of the relationship between free trade and other reform movements, particularly Chartism. Relations between the League and Chartism were undoubtedly contentious and riven with mutual mistrust, yet it is important to look beyond the official organizations, leadership and activist cadre. Livesey operated independently in a space between the League and Chartism and may well have appealed to those who were happy to pick and choose elements from both sides. After all, there were plenty of free trade petitions that differed from or even contradicted the League's vision of free trade.<sup>143</sup> Livesey was one of the unsung heroes of the anti-corn law campaign but can also be regarded as an important figure in the transition from the era of popular radicalism to popular liberalism in two respects. Firstly, through the widely circulated *Struggle* Livesey was perhaps the foremost popularizer of Cobdenite free trade, which was a cardinal tenet of later Gladstonian liberalism, and British political and economic culture.<sup>144</sup> His target audience, particularly independent working men, overlapped with the one of the key elements of Gladstone's popular constituency. Secondly, Livesey adapted radical print culture in a way that was populist, independent, neither unrespectable nor bland, that anticipated the popular liberal press that flourished from the mid-1850s. The cheap free trade print culture of the 1840s, though ephemeral and largely forgotten, paved the way for important and enduring shifts in political culture and popular politics.

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- <sup>96</sup> O.C. Jensen, 'The *Travels* of John Magee: Tracing the Geographies of Britain's Itinerant Print-Sellers, 1789-1815', *Cultural and Social History*, 11 (2014), pp. 195-6, 209-10.
- <sup>97</sup> *ABTC*, 27 Jan. 1842, p. 100.
- <sup>98</sup> Livesey, *Autobiography*, p.22.
- <sup>99</sup> Joseph Christy to J.B. Smith, [n.d. 1843] Archives+, MCL, MS 923.2 S333, fos. 478-92.
- <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, fos. 480, 483.

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- <sup>104</sup> C. Fox, *Graphic Journalism in England during the 1830s and 1840s* (New York, 1988), p. 91.
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<sup>141</sup> *ABTC*, 7 Apr. 1842, p. 120, 17 Nov. 1842, p. 200; *League*, 24 Nov. 1843, p. 136;

Pearce, *Joseph Livesey*, p. lxxii.

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<sup>143</sup> Miller, 'Popular Petitioning', pp. 907-9.

<sup>144</sup> Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, pp. 93-101.

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